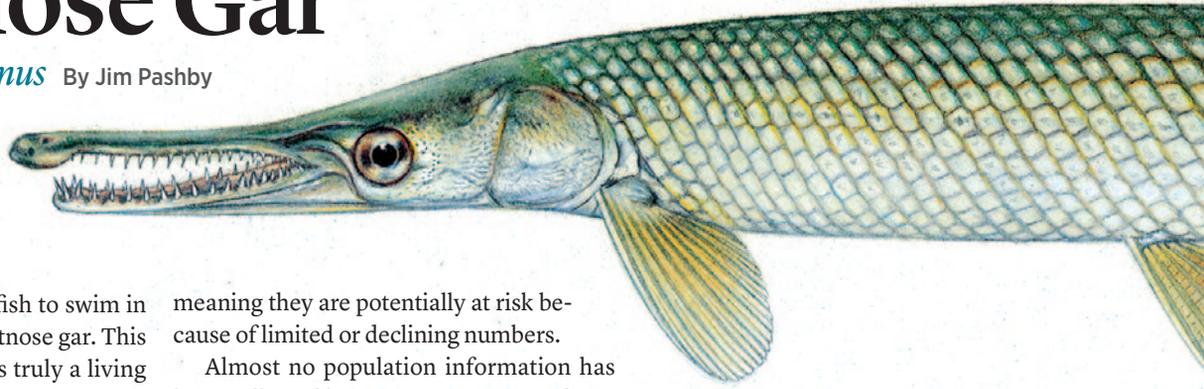


Shortnose Gar

Lepisosteus platostomus By Jim Pashby



One of the strangest fish to swim in Montana is the shortnose gar. This primitive creature is truly a living fossil, closely resembling fossilized fish that date back hundreds of millions of years. Even if none of us ever catches one in the few waters where they swim, or spots one in the clear waters below Fort Peck Dam, just knowing about this amazing species adds to our appreciation of the vast diversity of aquatic life in Big Sky Country.

IDENTIFICATION

You'd never mistake a shortnose gar for any other fish species. These olive-green to brown predators have a long, torpedo-like body covered in a sheath of small, interlocking, diamond-shaped plates that bend and flex as the fish moves, like a medieval suit of chain mail. Hard as tooth enamel, gar "scales" were once used by some American Indian tribes to tip their arrows. In southern states, the skins of larger gar species like the alligator gar were sometimes used to cover wooden plows before steel blades became widely available.

Another unique feature of the shortnose gar is its long snout lined with rows of conical, needle-sharp teeth. The tail fin is rounded and marked with several dark spots. Like a northern pike, the only fish it even vaguely resembles, the gar has a dorsal fin far back on its body, allowing it to accelerate forward with lightning speed to grab unsuspecting prey in its toothy jaws.

RANGE

Most shortnose gar live in the Mississippi River Basin from the Twin Cities south to the Gulf of Mexico. But the species also ranges up the Missouri as far as Montana. They are listed as a species of concern in Montana,

meaning they are potentially at risk because of limited or declining numbers.

Almost no population information has been collected in Montana. For years shortnose gar were thought to swim only in a few artificial ponds near Glasgow called the Dredge Cuts. In a 1980 *Montana Outdoors* article, Montana fisheries expert George Holton wrote that only one other record had ever come from the Missouri River proper, a fish caught in 1979 downstream of Fort Peck Dam, at the mouth of Little Porcupine Creek. But in recent years, FWP crews conducting fish surveys have netted shortnose gar specimens on the Yellowstone River 70 miles upstream from its confluence with the Missouri, roughly 10 miles upstream in the Milk River, and on the lower Missouri near Bainville, indicating its range here is greater than previously thought.

CHARACTERISTICS

The shortnose gar is the only fish in Montana that can actually breathe air by lifting its snout above water and taking gulps. The fish processes oxygen from the atmosphere in its gas bladder, allowing it to survive in water practically devoid of oxygen. In other states,

SCIENTIFIC NAME

Lepisosteus is a combination of the Greek *lepiss* for "scale" and *osteon* for "bone," while *platostomus* comes from the Greek words *platy*, meaning "flat," and *stomus*, meaning "mouth."

this indomitable fish has been known to live 24 hours or more completely out of water.

Females lay bright green poisonous (to humans) eggs in shallow, weedy bays and backwaters that warm to over 70 degrees F. The young often lie in groups at the water surface, looking like floating black matchsticks.

HABITAT

These are fish of clear, quiet river pools and open, silty rivers, where they laze in still waters waiting for minnows and other finned prey.

ANGLING

Shortnose gar are tough to catch because hooks can rarely penetrate their hard, bony mouth. But occasionally an angler using especially sharp lures can get a good hookset. Some fly anglers catch the fish with "rope" flies, consisting of a 4-inch piece of unraveled nylon rope—no hook required—slowly stripped across the water surface in hopes that an attacking gar gets a tooth or two caught in the frayed fibers long enough to bring it in to the net.

In Montana, shortnose gar can grow to over 7 pounds and 34 inches long. In southern states, shortnose gar up to 13 pounds have been taken. Those states also hold alligator gars, a relative of the shortnose that can weigh more than 300 pounds and reach more than 8 feet long. 🐟



Gar caught on a fly in the Dredge Cuts near Glasgow.

Jim Pashby is a writer in Helena.